Celebrating African Drumming and Dance in a Rural Montana Classroom

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Abstract
Nicholls, Lisa, M.A., Summer 2007 Fine Arts, Integrated Arts and Education Celebrating African Drumming and Dance in a Rural Montana Classroom Chairperson: Karen Kaufmann Community is the key word when describing Lone Rock School, a rural, K-8 school located in the Bitterroot Valley in Montana, and my place of employment. Lone Rock takes pride in the fact that it is the oldest continuously operating school in the Northwest. The school and community have a symbiotic relationship, both maintaining strong identities, in part due to their close relationship. The challenge is to maintain and enrich this relationship, helping it to remain relevant in a global and ever-changing world. I include myself in this relationship, as I too, have been embedded here for the last thirty years.

During the summer of 2006, I had the good fortune to take a class in West African Drumming and Dancing at The Creative Pulse, University of Montana. The experience was powerful and joyous, and when it was over, I knew I wanted more. I decided immediately that I would somehow bring this experience to my second grade students at Lone Rock. And so, my second graders and I spent the year “walking through Africa”. We explored the cultures of its many and diverse countries by way of music, dance, art, storytelling, biography, history, and current events.

On a Saturday afternoon, March 10th, 2007, we presented what we had learned in a performance designed for parents and the community. My students performed a play adapted from the book A Story, a Story, by Gale Haley, as well as two African dances. Afterwards, four members of LEDA, (a group of performers of West African drumming and dancing), engaged both students and audience in a wonderful African dance experience. This project became a vehicle that has helped me reflect on the many issues that are being faced in our local school community and the educational community at large. In addition, this particular group of students was one of my most challenging ever in terms of behavior and neediness. When considering a title for our performance, a colleague suggested “An African Miracle”, because we thought it would take a miracle to get through the performance without some sort of meltdown. Miracle or not, on the day of the performance they were magnificent! That success came about as a result of great risk and rigor, especially from the students. The importance of this success to these children and their families has affirmed to me the importance of keeping the arts alive through celebration in one’s community.

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Downtown Dance Festival, produced by Battery Dance Company, lets you experience foreign cultures without worrying about the language barrier (or transoceanic flight). Highlights include the American debut of Sri Warisan, a 15-member troupe from Singapore that specializes in Malay ethnic dance, music and theater; and Exit 12, a company founded by an Iraq war veteran dedicated to telling the stories of global violence and conflict through movement. Sri Warisan appears on Saturday and Exit 12 on Sunday. Both acts are part of a bigger lineup that performs from 1 to 4 p.m. on both days. (The Lawn a The theatrical dance is very lively and performed in a circle with plenty of ornate costumes. Forro. Forro originates from the northeast of Brazil, yet its popularity has spread across the country over the last few years, especially in the southeast. The dance is performed in pairs and ranges from a slow, intimate side shuffle, to a much more complex rhythm of fast footwork, swings and jumps, bearing some similarities to the waltz. Lundu is an Afro-Brazilian dance and music, originating from Africa. Performed in a couple, the dance is relatively slow yet highly-charged and sensual. It has been identified as the root of choro (a Brazilian style of music) and samba. Baião. Considered a fundamental part of forro, baião mixes various music and dance cultures from African, European and indigenous societies.